

Thurston County Drug Court celebrates 15 years of success

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Thurston County will celebrate 15 years of Drug Court and its newer "problem-solving courts" during a benefit dinner at 5:30 p.m. Friday at the Lacey Community Center.

The dinner is hosted by The Strophy Foundation, a non-profit that provides financial support for Thurston County Drug Court, as well as the county's other problem-solving courts, including DUI Court, Family Recovery Court, Juvenile Drug Court, Mental Health Court and Veteran's Treatment Court.

The Strophy Foundation is named for retired Thurston County Superior Court Judge Richard Strophy, who was presiding judge for Thurston County Drug Court from its inception in May, 1998, until his retirement in January, 2009. The non-profit, recently renamed in recognition of Strophy's commitment to Drug Court, raises money for things like GED costs for drug court participants.

Thurston County Drug Court Program Administrator Ellen Goodman, who has run drug court since its inception, will be honored during Friday's dinner. Dave Wilson, longtime owner of Dirty Dave's Restaurant who died recently, will be also honored posthumously for his efforts in support of drug court.

During an interview Wednesday, Strophy said Goodman "has been essential in every way to the development and success of the Drug Court program." Strophy recalled how, when the program was started in 1998, Goodman scrambled in just two weeks after her hire to write a grant application that secured the initial funds to start the program.

Since then, Goodman has worked tirelessly, cultivating relationships with police officers, prosecutors, defense attorneys and counselors, to make Drug Court the success it is today, Strophy said.

"When we hired Ellen, that was the best thing we ever did," Strophy said.

In 15 years, Strophy estimated that Goodman's efforts have secured up to \$6 million in grants that fund Thurston County Drug Court.

Added Thurston County Prosecuting Attorney Jon Tunheim, "I think she's incredibly important to the success of the program."

Wilson is being honored for his financial support to Drug Court over the years, and for providing vital employment opportunities for Drug Court participants and graduates. He also helped with things like providing gift certificates for free pizzas for Drug Court participants who met benchmarks for success as they made their way through the program.

Wilson's restaurant, Dirty Dave's Pizza Parlor, is providing a spaghetti for Friday's dinner celebration at the Lacey Community Center. Wilson died in September at age 76.

Dave Wilson's son, Greg, said Thursday that he was vaguely aware that his father had helped out with Drug Court over the years, but he did not know the extent of his father's participation, or even that he was going to be honored during Friday's dinner.

"He was always willing to give," Greg Wilson said of his father. "He was pretty quiet about it."

WHAT IS DRUG COURT?

Since 1998, Thurston County Drug Court has given non-violent felony offenders with addiction problems the chance to have their pending felony cases dismissed, provided that they stay sober and complete the rigorous program, which typically takes a minimum of between one year and 18 months to complete.

Drug Court participants appear weekly before the presiding Drug Court judge, along with a prosecutor, defense attorney and Goodman, who all collaborate to monitor participants' progress. Drug Court participants are tested for drug or alcohol use - and if they miss a court appearance, a counseling session, or relapse, they run the risk of being thrown in jail, or being given other sanctions for their misbehavior.

If a drug court participant repeatedly fails to comply, he or she can be thrown out of the program altogether.

In Thurston County, drug court participants must meet educational or employment benchmarks while enrolled, they must get counseling for their addiction, and, unique to Thurston County, they are offered counseling for traumas they might have experienced that can contribute to the cycle of addiction.

Since 1998, there have been 454 Thurston County Drug Court graduates. A state study of Washington's drug courts 10 years ago found that drug court graduates have a 13 percent recidivism rate, compared to over 50 percent for defendants who go to jail or prison after being convicted of addiction-driven crimes, Strophy said.

During an interview in October, Thurston County Drug Court graduate Jennifer West credited the program with turning her life around. West, 35, graduated from drug court in 2000, after battling an addiction to heroin.

During last year's interview, West credited Drug Court's "safe, supportive" environment with giving her the tools she needed to stay sober. She credited Strophy with "treating her like a person" and not a court case during her drug court experience.

As Thurston County Drug Court's has demonstrated its success, the Thurston County Commission has supported the creation of other alternative, "problem-solving" courts, Strophy said.

In particular, Strophy thanked Thurston County Commissioner Cathy Wolfe "for her constant support of the drug court and problem-solving court concept."

Today, there Thurston County also has programs like DUI court, which allows participants to serve a mandatory minimum sentence for their misdemeanor DUI offense, provided that they plead guilty and complete the program.

And Thurston County Mental Health Court allows defendants with mental-health issues to get treatment, while Veteran's Court gives veterans help with problems like post-traumatic stress disorder. A juvenile drug court is available for young offenders in Thurston County, and Family Recovery Court has a goal of helping parents reunite with their children, provided they can get past their addictions.

Strophy said one important aspect of Drug Court and other problem-solving courts is that they save the county money by reducing incarceration rates among defendants and lowering recidivism.

Strophy also thanked the judges who took over Thurston County Drug Court after his retirement. Thurston County Superior Court Judge Gary Tabor was the presiding Drug Court judge after Strophy's retirement, and the Thurston County Superior Court Judge Carol Murphy is the current presiding Drug Court judge.

Thurston County Superior Court Judge James Dixon is going to take over as presiding Thurston County Drug Court Judge later this year, Strophy said.

Friday's dinner will include a performance by the Tumwater High School Jazz Band. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. and dinner starts at 6 p.m. The dinner will be at the Lacey Community Center, located at 6729 Pacific Avenue SE in Olympia.

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Read more here: <http://www.theolympian.com/2014/01/30/2957674/thurston-county-drug-court-celebrates.html#storylink=cpy>